Personal Broadcasters: Those Were The Days!

In The 1920s, Many Stations Were Little More Than Tabletop Hobby Operations

By Alice Brannigan

Would you like to own and operate your own private broadcasting station? In recent years there have been many communications hobbyists who would give anything to do this. There are also those who continue to beg the FCC to permit such stations to legally exist, perhaps using low power in the FM band, the FCC has firmly rejected all proposals. Some folks have given up hope, and illegally taken to the FM, AM, and SW bands without benefit of FCC sanction.

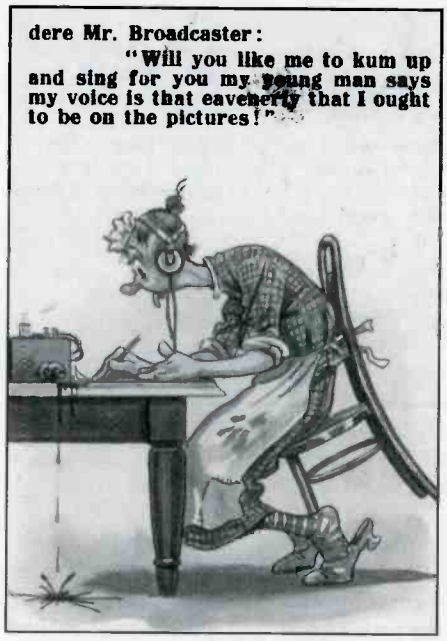
Back in the early days of radio broadcasting, it was not this way. Virtually anyone who took a fancy to the new technology could get a license of one kind or another to put a little station on the air, and such stations quickly popped up from coast-to-coast in the early 1920s. The first stations were operating by virtue of actual broadcasting licenses, as well as school, ham and experimental licenses. Stations were located in bedrooms, basements, attics, garages, barns, stores, banks, churches, colleges, offices, and dozens of other locations.

This was a mix of commercial and non-commercial operations. Often they were owned by hams, especially those who also sold and repaired radio receivers. Mostly the low-powered private stations operated for only a few hours at a time, and perhaps only on certain days of the week. Their programs were usually impromptu and informal, frequently filled with rather awful live local unprofessional talent. They also played phonograph recordings.

Audiences usually loved these stations, especially those located in their own home towns where the only other stations that could be heard might be in distant cities. Distant listeners also enjoyed them because they provided challenges in the new hobby of DX monitoring. Though running only flea power, the little stations

The original KFBE location at Clin's. That's Mr. Horn leaning on the counter over to the right-center. (Broadcast Pro- File photo supplied by R. H. Horn, CA).

When KFBE was moved briefly to its second store location in San Luis Obispo, here's how it looked. (Broadcast Pro-File photo supplied by R.H. Horn, CA).


dere Mr. Broadcaster:
"Will you like me to kum up and sing for you my young man says my voice is that eaveherly that I ought to be on the pictures!"

Early broadcasters liked to fill their air time with live local talent, and had no shortage of offers to perform. Unfortunately, the majority of volunteers were unprofessional and pretty awful. This 1923 joke postcard pokes fun at the pop phenomenon.

received reception reports and fan mail from listeners hundreds of miles away.

There were scores of these stations, the careers of which usually closely followed the personal fortunes and enthusiasm levels of their owners. Many fizzled because their owners lost interest. The government revoked numerous licenses because of technical violations or inactivity. Sadly, all too many of the little stations came and went without leaving sufficient ripples in the annals of broadcasting for them to be easily or often recalled, either individually or as a group.

Nevertheless, many personal stations, as well as those starting out as flea-powered amateur and experimental broadcasters, did persevere and flourish, and continued in operation for many years, even until today, some with as much as 50 kW (perhaps under different call letters, and usually under different owners). A few of those include KCLN, KFI, KNBC, KLZ, WDRC, WMT, WOC, WWL, WBT, WDAY, WCOL, and KRKO. Amateur, experimental, and college stations of the early 1920s that received regular broadcast licenses included, for example: 1ZE/WBBG, 1ZC/WCJ, 4XD/WBT, 5RK/WREC, 5XD/KOB, 5XT/WKY, 6ADZ/KNX, 6AM/KLS, 6XAE/KYY, 6XAG/KJJ, 6XAJ/KZM, 6XAK/KYJ, 6XC/KZY, 6XD/KOG, 6XE/KQW (now KCBS), 6XG/KDN, 8CR/WLW, 8MK/WWJ, 8XK/KDKA, 8YC/WHCU, 8ZAE/KQV, 9XJ/WILL, 9XM/WHA, 9YA/WSUI, 9YB/WBAA, 9YI/WOI, 9ZAF/KIZ, and 9ZP/KGFX.

A Typical Personal Station

Reuben H. Horn, who worked at Clin's Electric Shop in San Luis Obispo, CA, was granted a limited commercial license in late July of 1922 for a broadcasting station. Horn was actually one of the earliest individuals to obtain such a license, as broadcasting had only begun in earnest earlier that year. He was assigned the call letters KFBE for 10 watt operation on the common frequency of 833 kHz.

This license was issued for the station to be located at Clin's store, 990 Monterey Street, a two-story brick structure built in 1894. Two masts were built on the roof and a flattop "T" type antenna was strung up. The studio was located in the back of the store, while the transmitter was on the balcony above the studio.

KFBE's broadcasts commenced in July of 1922. In early 1924, KFBE was running a one-hour 4:30 p.m., sked every

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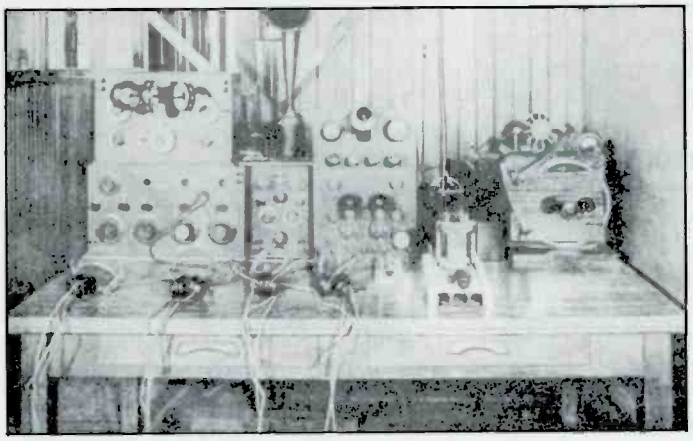
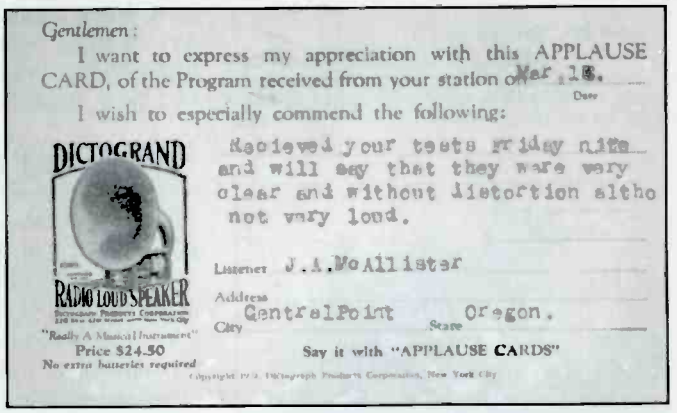


Here's Pittsburgh's KQV in 1919 when it was first flea-power broadcasting as amateur station 8ZAE. These days it runs 5 kW.



Gentlemen:

I want to express my appreciation with this APPLAUSE CARD, of the Program received from your station on Mar. 18.
Date

I wish to especially commend the following:

DICTOGRAND RADIO LOUD SPEAKER
"Really A Musical Instrument"
Price $24.50
No extra batteries required

Received your tests Friday nite and will say that they were very clear and without distortion altho not very loud.

Listener J.A.McAllister

Address

City Central Point State Oregon.

Say it with "APPLAUSE CARDS"

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A prepared "applause" card sent in by one of KFBE's listeners from Oregon stating the signals were clear but not too strong. (Broadcast Pro-File photo supplied by R.H. Horn, CA).

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. By 1924, KFBE had increased to 50 watts and had been reassigned to operate on 1240 kHz. It was heard from as far away as Oregon. But something happened, and later that year Horn quit Clin's Electric shop and removed his equipment from the premises. In November of 1924, Horn told the Department of Commerce that KFBE had been, "dismantled and permanently discontinued." The government deleted the station's license.

In February of 1925, Horn connected with a partner and together they opened up Horn and Wilson's Radioland, a new store at 605 Monterey Street. Whereas Clin's had sold everything electrical, from light fixtures to appliances, as well as radios, Radioland was devoted exclusively to the sales of radios and radio parts. Horn went back to the Bureau of Navigation, U.S. Dept. of Commerce and said he wanted his license reinstated. The government obliged, and in February, KFBE was permitted to return to the air, but this time on 1390 kHz. The transmitter was installed in the basement.

KFBE did not thrive in its new environment. After only a few months of operation, KFBE's broadcasting activities were abandoned, with the station leaving the air for good. The government deleted the license in May of 1925.

More than 70 years after the fact, it's hard to accurately say why KFBE died. But we do know for certain that in less than three years, KFBE had arrived with lots of hope, operated from two locations, and was then abandoned.

We have a pair of rare photos of KFBE, showing each of its locations. In addition, several cards sent in by KFBE's listeners expressing appreciation for the station's programs. These are Broadcast Pro-File photos that were supplied to them by Reuben H. Horn of San Luis Obispo.

Thanks to Broadcast Pro-File for permitting us to use material from their profile of KFBE. BP-F is a company that (for a reasonable fee) researches and prepares in-depth accurate historical profiles of all FCC licensed AM/FM broadcasters, past and present. A catalog of services and fees is available for $1 from: Broadcast Pro-File, 28243, Royal Road, Castaic, CA 91384-3028. Please let them know you read about it here.

Meanwhile, In Canada . . .

Most people today don't realize that during the first years of the broadcasting era, Canada had 10 licensed low-power (about 10–20 watts) non-commercial stations categorized as "Amateur Broadcasting Stations." Heard over wide areas, most had special programs for DX hobbyists, and all issued QSLs. They used "10" as their call-sign prefix, and apparently all operated on 1190 and/or 1200 kHz. Because broadcast station directories practically never listed them, today they have managed to become all but totally forgotten.

Here is what our research has been able

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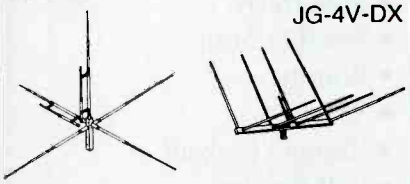

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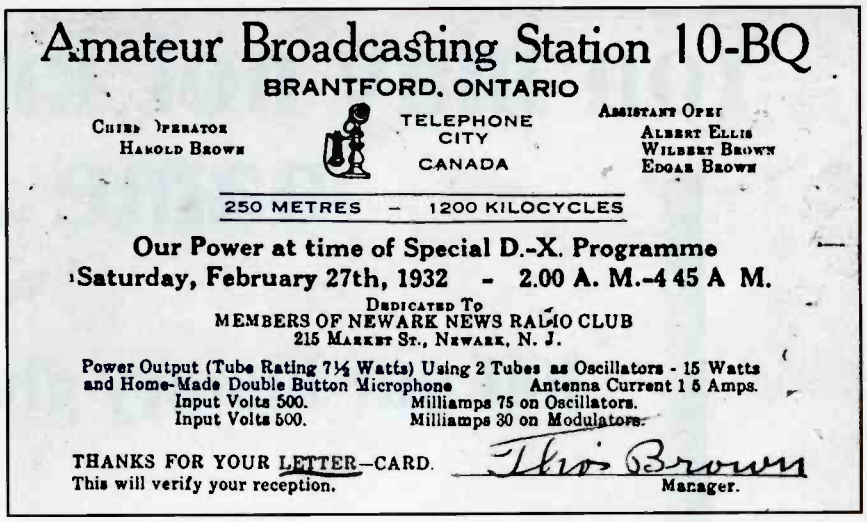
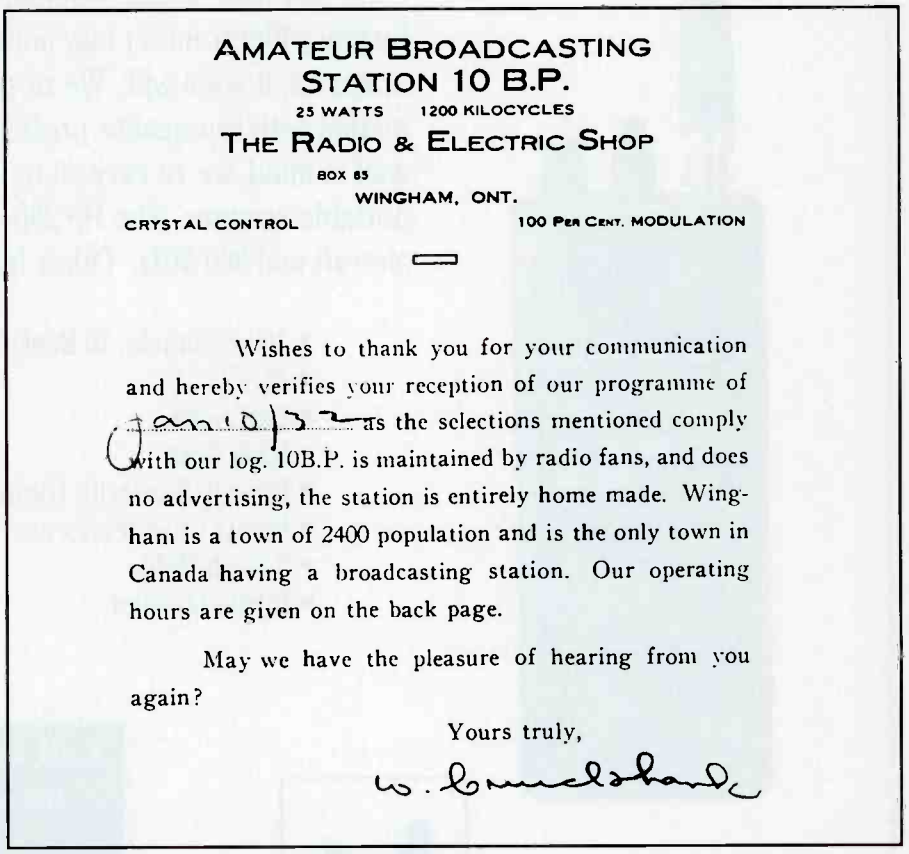


Amateur Broadcasting Station 10-BQ
BRANTFORD, ONTARIO
Chief Operator Harold Brown
TELEPHONE CITY CANADA
Assistant Opet Albert Ellis Wilbert Brown Edgar Brown
250 METRES – 1200 KILOCYCLES
Our Power at time of Special D.-X. Programme
Saturday, February 27th, 1932 - 2.00 A. M.-4 45 A M.
Dedicated To
MEMBERS OF NEWARK NEWS RADIO CLUB
215 Market St., Newark, N. J.
Power Output (Tube Rating 7½ Watts) Using 2 Tubes as Oscillators - 15 Watts
and Home-Made Double Button Microphone Antenna Current 1 5 Amps.
Input Volts 500. Milliamps 75 on Oscillators.
Input Volts 500. Milliamps 30 on Modulators.
THANKS FOR YOUR LETTER—CARD.
This will verify your reception.
Manager.

Canadian amateur broadcaster 10BQ sent out this QSL in 1932 for one of its special DX tests.



AMATEUR BROADCASTING
STATION 10 B.P.
25 WATTS 1200 KILOCYCLES
THE RADIO & ELECTRIC SHOP
BOX 85
WINGHAM, ONT.
CRYSTAL CONTROL 100 Per Cent. MODULATION

Wishes to thank you for your communication and hereby verifies your reception of our programme of Jan 10 32 as the selections mentioned comply with our log. 10B.P. is maintained by radio fans, and does no advertising, the station is entirely home made. Wingham is a town of 2400 population and is the only town in Canada having a broadcasting station. Our operating hours are given on the back page.

May we have the pleasure of hearing from you again?

Yours truly,
W. Lunchbrand

For whatever reason, in 1932 the QSL from amateur broadcaster 10BP told folks it was located in the only town in Canada having a broadcasting station.

to piece together on these nearly unknown pioneer broadcasters:

Station 10AB, Moose Jaw, Sask., was operated by W.G. Buchanan (amateur 4AM), of the Moose Jaw Radio Association, located in the Grant Hall Hotel. It began operating on April 22, 1922, and claimed to be the oldest amateur station in Canada. The station was affiliated with several broadcasting networks, and had been reported from every U.S. state, and all Canadian provinces (except the Maritimes). In 1933, this station became present-day station CHAB.

Station 10AD, owned by James S. Neill and Sons, Ltd., Fredericton, New Brunswick, started broadcasting on January 12, 1923. In 1926 it became CFNB, which ran 50 watts.

Station 10AK, Stratford, Ont., was op-

erated by M.I. Higgins (3ACG) at his electric and radio shop, 151 Ontario Street. The station operated on 1190 kHz with 15 watts. It claimed to be "one of the oldest" amateur stations in Canada, having commenced broadcasting in 1927. In 1935, it turned into station CJCS.

Radio station 10AS, owned by the Island Radio Co., Charlottetown, P.E.I., started up on August 15, 1924. In 1925 it evolved into CFCY, which ran between 50–100 watts.

Station 10AT, licensed to Horace N. Stovin, Main Street, Unity, Sask., went on the air in 1923, then turned into station CHSC in 1925, which ran 250 watts on 840 kHz. However, CHSC did not work out and left the air after only a few years.

Station 10AT, Trail, B.C. The government reissued the call letters 10AT on December 25, 1931, and in 1933 this 10AT became station CJAT.

Station 10BI, Prince Albert, B.C., started in 1925 and evolved into commercial station CKBI in 1933.

Station 10BP, Wingham, Ont., was operated by the Telephone City Radio Assn. (2SH) on 1200 kHz with a home-brewed 25 watt transmitter. Special DX programs were on 1190 kHz. It was owned by W. Cruickshank, of The Radio and Electric Shop. The station began operation on February 20, 1926, and in 1935 became CKNX. The 10BP QSL curiously stated that Wingham was "the only town in Canada having a broadcasting station."

Station 10BQ, Brantford, Ont. was operated by Harold Brown on 1200 kHz. It used 15 watts into an antenna consisting of two 50-ft. Inverted-L type wires strung 75 ft. high. They claimed the station was heard from Newfoundland to New Zealand." In 1934, the station became CKPC.

Station 10BT, was owned by the Western Ontario Better Radio Club, Chatham, Ont. It commenced operation with 25 watts in 1926 and two years later had become CFCO.

With the exception of short-lived CHSC in Saskatchewan, the commercial broadcast station heirs to each of these wonderful and obscure radio stations are still in regular operation.

We invite you to pass along for use here any old time radio or wireless photos, picture postcards, QSL cards or letters (good photocopies will do just fine), station listings, news clippings, etc. We also seek your memories, anecdotes, and column suggestions. Our e-mail address is <Radioville@juno.com>. See you on the road to Radioville. ■

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